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WHO ARE THE DISADVANTAGED.

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THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES SOME SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL, SOCIAL, ENVIRONMENTAL, PARENTAL AND HYGIENIC DEPRIVATIONS OF DISADVANTAGED YOUTH. ALSO NOTED ARE DEPRIVATIONS THAT RESULT FROM RACE, CONSTRICTED EXPERIENCE, AND EDUCATIONAL HANDICAPS. EDUCATION IS CONSIDERED THE MOST IMPORTANT MEANS OF BREAKING THROUGH THE COMPLEX CYCLE OF POVERTY AND DEPRIVATION. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "JOURNAL OF SECONDARY EDUCATION," VOLUME 41, NUMBER 4, APRIL 1966. (NH)

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Who Are the Disadvantaged?

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ALLAN C. ORNSTEIN

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the first of two articles by Mr. Ornstein dealing in a subject area of great concern these days. The second article titled, "Training Teachers for Slum Schools," will appear in the May JOURNAL.*

Introduction

The President's Council of Economic Advisors, using the 1962 price index, reports that a family of four is poor if its annual income is $3,000 or less. A single person is considered poor if he earns less than $1,500. With this in mind, the Administration maintains that between 33 and 35 million Americans scrape along in poverty.

Harrington's *The Other America* contends that the same family earning $4,000 in 1960 is poor. The amount for an unattached individual is $2,000. He believes that between 40 and 50 million Americans are living in poverty.[25]

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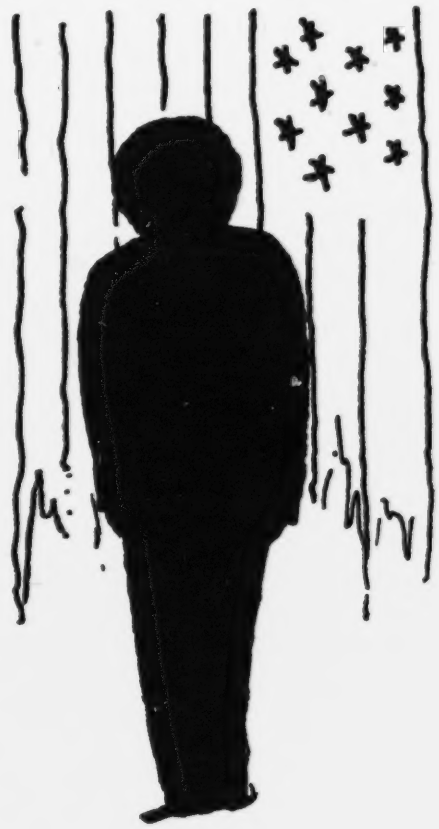
IN addition to the poverty level, I am of the opinion that a subsistence level exists. An individual earning between $2,000 and $3,000 falls into this category, so does a two-person family earning between $3,000 and $4,000, and so does a four-person family earning between $4,000 and $5,000. Applying these figures to the 1960 census, and adding it to those who live in poverty, it is estimated that 70 million Americans live in one or the other low income groups.[16]

The populace of both income groups, to be sure, is financially disadvantaged. This means that they cannot afford many goods and services which are essential to the majority of Americans. It also means that they are subject to a whole chain of other disadvantages. In a vicious, stubborn cycle; the fact that they are financially



disadvantaged causes other disadvantages, and the fact that they have so many other disadvantages gives rise and increases their financial deprivation.

The majority are white, although nonwhite minorities suffer the most intense and concentrated number of disadvantages. In a spectrum of grim blight, they stretch across the country, from North to South, from coast to coast, hidden in rural

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waste lands and submerged in urban squalor. Although the magnitude and the number of their disadvantages vary with the level of their income, many live on the fringe, in a bleak no-man's land, human exiles from the rest of America.

Now the disadvantaged youth, and by this I mean about 40 per cent of the 70 million Americans,[16] seem doomed to become the next generation of disadvantaged Americans. Although their only real chance of changing their fortune is by taking advantage of educational opportunities available to them, most of them drop out of school or graduate as functional illiterates.[40]

The problem is the same everywhere. The schools have been unable to educate or equip these children for today's world.[40] Their access to occupational opportunity and a better life is impossible, because they do not have "the vocational training and background of skills and knowledge to get and keep a job."[38] Since these youngsters cannot obtain a job except of the most inferior quality, they never get a chance to break away from their misfortune. It is foolish, therefore, to hope for a brighter future where every indication leads us to expect a worsening trend. Midway through the sixties, then, the nation is confronted with a most dangerous problem: As Harrington puts it, "An enormous concentration of young people who, if they do not receive immediate help, may well be the source of a kind of heredity (deprivation) new to American society."[25,p.183]

It is now appropriate to consider more specific aspects of this deprivation; perhaps, then, we will be able to surmise a solution to this foreboding crisis.

Self Deprivation. Disadvantaged children often have injured personalities. Many lack a sense of self-esteem, self-praise, and self-importance. Many have low and unrealistic aspiration levels. "They feel," according to Kvaraceus, "like nothing and nobody, unwanted and unnecessary."[32] They have feelings of guilt and shame, and have limited trust in adults.[31]

Disadvantaged children are usually too demoralized and frustrated, and too powerless to combat the forces that confuse and ensnare their lives.[22] They "know" they are failures, and they are convinced they always will be. They live in defeat and despair, and feel inferior and exiled from the prevailing society. The majority are too disillusioned and dispirted to care. They have been rejected and discouraged too many times to have any ideas of hope or ambition.[39] They will not even try to do what is necessary to escape their deprivation — stay in school, for instance.

ALSO, the disadvantaged cannot cope with humiliation, nor can they assimilate an attack on their dignity or values. Resentment, intense anxiety, and often direct hostility are manifested among these adolescents.[21] Any aspect of authority: their parents, their teachers, the law, the school, is a direct target for their anger. Similarly, emotional disorders requiring specialized treatment are common among many of these children.[31,39]

One of my colleagues described these children: "They know they are being left out of the mainstream. They're sophisticated and naive at the same time. They know they have little opportunity and yet they want the American dream — a job,

a car, a T.V., a little recognition." Another colleague added, "'The Star-Spangled Banner' doesn't mean a thing for these children, and when they say 'liberty and justice for all' they know damn well they're not getting their full share."

Social Deprivation. Disadvantaged youth are often uncommitted to the larger society and uncontrolled by its values. Unable to participate successfully in the life of the larger society, they feel unwanted and rejected, and often turn to delinquent sub-cultures. "In these subcultures," writes Olsen, "the youngster's need for status and acceptance is satisfied."[38] Here he is respected, and his lack of a sense of identification with the general American culture is reinforced to the point that he is all but lost to his society.[38,44]

In this connection, Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin have set forth a theory that explains juvenile delinquency essentially as a response to deprivation. Given a society with a certain core of values shared by all which emphasizes achievement and status, and given certain classes of youth that are deprived of the means to participate or obtain success, and there is a high manifestation of antisocial behavior.[7]

The negative values evidenced by these children begin to develop at an early age. Tenenbaum[49] and Cavan[4] maintain that it is not surprising to find disadvantaged children of six or seven smoking and sniffing airplane glue, and young teenage boys and girls openly engaging in sex play, drinking, gambling, and stealing. By the same token, Salisbury is of the opinion that many by their early teens make excellent prospects for dope and vice; in fact, both go hand in hand. "First the girl is 'hooked' to drugs," he writes. "Then, she is put into prostitution to earn money for her drugs."[45, p. 79]

What makes matters worse is that the parents are often tolerant and uncritical of such behavior. Some are too busy working or caring for a host of other sons and daughters, but others are engaged in the same activities as their children. For example, Cavan asserts that "the free sexual activities of the adolescent girl may simply repeat the activities of her mother; the girl herself may be illegitimate."[4]

The outcome is that disadvantaged youth accept and often boast of their deviant behavior. Many are proud of, rather than disturbed by their actions. In reacting as they do, then, these children are merely expressing contempt and striking out against those who reject them. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find depressed areas saturated with gangs. Writes Salisbury, "There is only one place where the youngsters can star. It's not at home, not in school. It's in the street."[45, p. 52]

To be sure, these are the same boys who turn schools into blackboard jungles, who extort protection money from younger children, who rape a thirteen-year-old girl in the bathroom, who make zip guns in shop, who knife the monitor in the hallway, and who attack the teacher who tries to bring them order.[39,45]

Environmental Deprivation. The disadvantaged are hidden along the rural countryside in wooden shanties over the hills and out of sight from our major turnpikes. They are also submerged in the garbage-strewn ghettos of our large cities.

Indeed, the physical conditions are depressing in both areas.

In rural and urban slums, whole families are boxed into one or two rooms, paying high rentals to a landlord they never see. There is no running water, no bath or inside toilet, no heat in winter, except what the kitchen stove delivers, no refrigerator, no icebox,[33,45] Two or three children may sleep on the same bed. Living space is cramped and overcrowded, denying any form of privacy and sensitizing children to adult sexual behavior. Maintains Crosby, "Often young girls are victims of adults. They become mothers when they are children. Illegitimacy is accepted."[9]

Not rarely, children three or four years old sit out on their front stoops late at night. In the backwoods of Georgia or on the streets in Harlem, the reason is the same. They cannot go to bed. Someone is sitting on it. Until the adults are ready for bed, there is no place for them to sleep. Consequently, many school children will fall asleep in class because they have not fully slept at night.

Here it is important to add that many city slums have been ripped down and replaced by low-cost housing projects. In many cases, however, this practice has made the environment worse, concentrating it almost exclusively with the most crippled and deviant segment of our population.

By screening the applicants to eliminate those with even modest wages, the community becomes a receptacle for the poorest and most deprived elements in our society.[45,52] Fort Greene, for instance, the largest low-income (Negro and Puerto Rican) housing project in the United States, has almost 50 per cent of its families on welfare.[24] As soon as a family income rises above a minimum figure, it is forced to leave, replaced by a needy family, more than likely on relief and incapable of helping itself, with probably one or more of its members engaged in some type of antisocial behavior. The whole community is a reservoir for what Conant characterizes as "social dynamite," and there are hundreds of urban communities like this across the country.

THUS it is that the home and street of the ghetto are despairing complements. Few successful adult models are available for the children to emulate. Deviant behavior and social problems also are frequent, and are worsening at a frightening pace. This is reflected in statistics on delinquency and crime, unemployment, welfare, alcoholism, prostitution, drug addiction, illegitimacy, illiteracy, disease, and broken homes.

Parental Deprivation. Most disadvantaged children are members of families with many problems: divorce, desertion, unemployment, chronic sickness, mental illness, delinquency, and alcoholism. Their parents or the adults they live with regard as normal and natural such things as poverty, dependence on relief agencies, free sex relations, illegitimate children, and physical combat.[4,26,34] Not surprisingly, the children reared in these homes also accept these conditions, all of which are marginal to delinquent behavior.

Most damaging to the child is family instability. "Children in the same family group," declares Crosby, "sometimes have a number of different fathers. These youngsters are accustomed to seeing a suc-

cession of men in the home whose relations with the mother are transistory."[3] In the same vein, Cavan writes, "Many children live within several families during their lives. Many have never lived with both parents."[4]

FREQUENTLY, the mother assumes the male role, as breadwinner and as the one who metes out harsh and suppressive forms of punishment.[15] She usually works even when the family is not split. The children are denied the benefits of her affection and love.[17,23] The atmosphere at home is indifferent and hostile. There is little kindness or supervision. The children, therefore, are free to roam the streets. The images of their parents are images of despair, frustration, and enforced idleness. They detach themselves from their parents, and they acquire independence outside the home. They rebel against teachers and the rest of the adult world, and they adopt interests in conflict with those of the school.

Hygienic Deprivation. There is a high rate of illness and malnutrition among disadvantaged groups. Many are ignorant of good health practices and are unable to pay for any type of medical care.[15] Their standards of sanitation and cleanliness are typical with respect to the dominant society.[14] Medical and dental checks will show hundreds of children who have never brushed their teeth or bathed regularly.[20]

A large number of these children are also improperly and irregularly fed. They go to bed hungry, they get up hungry, and they go to school hungry. They do not know what it means to go for one day with a full stomach. Their only complete meal is obtained in school; in fact, the school serves as a broadway for free lunch.

One study of low-class children indicated that 30 per cent of the group under 13 years of age had no milk. In another study, one-quarter of the children had no vegetables or fruits in the vitamin C category. More than half were suffering from vitamin A deficiencies. Similarly, a large number of the children were suffering from one form of malnutrition or another; gum and tongue conditions, rickets, and acne, for a few examples.[50]

It is depressing. The majority of the children who enter my classroom come with shabby and spoiled clothing. Their shirts and blouses are torn; buttons are missing; zippers do not work. When it rains some of them do not come to school, because they have holes in their shoes. On Fridays there are some who do not come to school, because they have no white shirt or blouse, and cannot be admitted to the assembly.

Thus there is a common denominator among these children; not enough proper medical care, not enough proper food, and not enough clothing.

Racial Deprivation. Besides being faced with an intricate number of disadvantages, non-white minorities suffer from discrimination and prejudices. This, in turn, intensifies their other disadvantages and institutionalizes their financial deprivation. In most instances, minority groups must accept a lower or inferior position because of norms and vertically imposed definitions the larger society sets up. Furthermore, they conform to expectations of the society although conformity is directly opposed to their own self-interest. Asserts Hines, "An acquiescence in degradation takes place which becomes internalized

and accepted wholly or in part by the discriminated group as part of its own way of life."[27]

With regard to Negro children, numerous tests indicate negative consciousness and unmistakable rejection of their skin color in preschool years.[6, 13, 28] Other tests also show that preschool white children ascribe inferior roles and low status to Negroes.[1, 2] At a very young age, then, Negro children learn that they belong to the wrong group and are worth very little according to the standards of the larger society.

Negro children have some contact with the world outside their ghetto, through mass-media communication: movies, radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and comic books. From these and other sources, they learn that they are considered by the prevailing society to have a second-class status.[38] In this connection Jefferson says, "They would like to think well of themselves but often tend to evaluate themselves according to standards used by other groups. These mixed feelings lend to self-hatred and rejection of their group, hostility toward other groups, and a generalized pattern of personality difficulties."[29]

Their attendance at a segregated school also adds to their "inferiority."[5] It should be noted, however, that many large cities spend extra money on these schools. New York City, for example, spends an extra $65 million yearly on "special services" for its 400 thousand disadvantaged children.[51] Nevertheless, segregated schools are generally inferior; more important, the children realize that they are being rejected and prevented from associating with children in the larger part of the community.

Corresponding problems exist among other minority groups. Spanish-speaking children, for example, are subjected to perhaps more discrimination. In addition, first-generation Mexican and Puerto Rican children have linguistic problems. Many are torn between two opposing cultures; therefore, suffer from "anomie."[3, 43, 52] Their whole life situation, too, encourages the conviction that they cannot improve their condition very much by school or hard work.

Experience Deprivation. For the greater part, the disadvantaged are handicapped by a lack of information and awareness about any part of the world except their own limited one. From his study, Deutsch found that 65 per cent of the slum children have never been more than twenty-five blocks away from home, that half reported their homes were not supplied with writing pens, and the majority had no books, except for some comic books and magazines.[18] Similarly, many of these children have never been to the movies, eaten in a restaurant, or ridden in a bus except to school. Some have never had a birthday party, some do not even know their own birthdays; likewise some begin school without knowing their own names.[15, 20, 31]

It should be noted that the youngsters' physical surroundings are also impoverished, thus retarding all types of cultural stimulus and background. As Deutsch points out, most disadvantaged children have limited experiences, a scarcity of objects to manipulate, and a limited number of colors and forms to discriminate.[19]

This stimulus and background deficiency is a primary cause for the child's learning and school retardation. Writes Deutsch, "A child . . . who has been deprived of a substantial portion of the variety which he is maturationally capable of responding to is likely to be deficient in the equipment required for learning."[19] In the same vein, Piaget's developmental theory makes clear that the more limited a youngster's experiences are, the less he is likely to be interested in learning.[30, 41, 42]

Education Deprivation. Besides lacking the requisite experience for learning basic skills, most disadvantaged youth are handicapped by numerous other factors which foster their school failure. Their depressed conditions have a deleterious effect upon their mental health.[19, 39] The fact that many come from crowded and noisy homes inhibits the development of their auditory and visual discrimination, and causes inattentiveness in school.[19, 42] Also, the combination of their impoverished environment and limited experiences hinders the development of their memory and language skills.[19, 35, 36, 41,]

In many instances the assumption is made that when these children begin school they have developed skills necessary for learning. The truth is, however, many are unable to speak in whole sentences and are unable to find sense in their teacher's statements or in the stories in their primer.[36] Many cannot perceive the difference between letters and numbers. Ordinary concepts, such as near and far, or even the difference between red and blue, are meaningless. To attempt to teach these children how to read before they can visualize different letters is absurd. The assumption, then, that they are ready for learning, is the cause for more frustration, and when continued and compounded year after year, it is the cause of school failure.

True, the parents of most disadvantaged youth have been unable to provide the background and initial experience for formal learning; nonetheless, the parents are not against education. At worst, they see no need for it and are indifferent. Writes Mitchell, "Many have hope for their children but have little formal education themselves and know very little about studies or how to help their children. Most parents care a great deal; but care without knowledge. . . ."[34]

Thus the experience deprivation of these children is compounded by the inadequacies of their parents. By the third grade, a large number are retarded one or more years in the basic skills. Their failure manifests a change in behavior. When they enter junior high school, they are openly defiant and their minds are closed. Passed from one grade to another, without any basis in knowledge or achievement, many lose interest in school; moreover, the longer they stay in school the more discouraged they become.

The outcome is that the majority of disadvantaged youth leave school or are suspended at an early age. In the poorest areas of the large cities about 60 to 70 per cent of the pupils drop out from school before graduation.[8] In discussing this point, Sexton found in her study that the dropout rate for low-income urban children is six times higher than that of middle-class children.[47] Rural areas have

even higher dropout figures.[12,37] Among Texas Mexicans, for example, the average education limit is six years of schooling, and the chances are that it is constantly interrupted, and inferior.[3,25]

Summary

Although no one program can itself lead to a solution to deprivation on a mass scale, education is most important, because without it there is no hope that the disadvantaged will ever acquire skills to hold a decent job so that they can break from their complex web of impoverishment. Unquestionably, more money is needed to be spent, more on elementary schools than in college, and more money in slum and rural schools than in suburban schools. Right now the situation is reversed.[46] Nevertheless, the political and economic power structure on all governmental levels is at present willing to spend large sums of money on the experimentation and research for the education of the disadvantaged. They are willing not because they have suddenly become humanitarian, but because they are afraid of the consequences if they do not.[40] For this reason, almost any school system or college can obtain today a federal grant which is focused on the educational needs of disadvantaged children.

But money is not enough, unless it is channeled wisely. The fact that the disadvantaged have an integral chain of handicaps means that the whole child must be considered. Higher Horizons' type of programs, prekindergarten education, after-school-study centers, and the like, have very rarely, if ever, been fully effective. In the next few years, we will spend billions of dollars on similar educational programs. Unless all the integral number of disadvantages of these children are taken into account our new efforts will also fail.

INDEED, time is running out. "This is our last chance," writes one educator. "We cannot afford another generation as ignorant as we are." The demands of our society necessitate that we educate our disadvantaged youth. As Shaw puts it, "The preservation of our democratic way of life, the demands of our economy, and the mental health of our people all require that we learn how to educate these children effectively."[48]

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